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Select Tale.

A Night on the Mississippi.

BY ADRIENNE

It was the 13th of February, 1841, a cold and cheerless night as ever fell upon this sorrow-clouded earth. On the West stretched out the broad, interminable forests of Arkansas; on the East, the fertile State of Mississippi; between, with tawny mane, and wild, terrific roar, the mighty Lion River rushed in solemn grandeur to the ocean.

Oppressed by the weight of accumulated sorrows, I had left my home, to find, if it were possible, amid the pleasing vicissitudes of travel, some Lethæan draught, some blessed reprieve from the anguish pressing so relentlessly upon my spirits. With all the chambers of my soul hushed with the sable paraphernalia of grief, I mixed with the delusions of other climes—"among them, but not of them,"—a silent but observant spectator of their actions and emotions.

A large and merry crowd of passengers were assembled in the spacious saloon of one of those first class steamers which ply upon the waters of the yellow Mississippi. Glittering chandeliers swung their crystal pendants, and waved their wings of light over a scene of almost Persian splendor and magnificence. Danes and divans and graceful ottomans were scattered around in rich profusion; an opulence of array, heightened in effect by multiplied reflection from the costly mirrors lining the whole length of the saloon. A handsome rose-wood piano stood on one side, covered with scattered music, and supporting a forsaken guitar; for the services of two celebrated harpists, fellow-travelers, together with those of a vagrant fiddler, having been brought in requisition for the evening it required not a prophet to predict that there was to be—

No sleep till morn, when Youth and Beauty meet,
To chase the glowing hours with flying feet.

Lonely and apart, I leaned against the stern of the boat, partially shaded by hangings of crimson brocade, nursing upon the folly and vanity of short-sighted man. Within a gay saloon, the viol's cherry strain, the joyous dance—without, the pitchy cloud, the roaring wind, the restless wave. As I sought with straining eye to penetrate the outer world of gloom, the whole sky, like an immense wall of starless darkness, loomed up with seeming threat of instant destruction; every timber of our vessel creaked and shook beneath the pressure of steam, with which she met the foaming waves and the fitful gust; while between the gaspings of that strange mysterious genius of fire and water I could distinctly hear the sullen roar of the turbid flood beneath—that dark, broad, interminable grave of hapless humanity which never cries, "It is enough."

How soon, thought I, these fair and graceful forms, pale and fragile as white water lilies, may be borne along this wild and rapid current, in all the helplessness of death! how soon the rush of giant waves may quench the brilliancy of these dazzling lights! how soon the luxurious lavishment of mirrors and rose-wood may sink beneath the silence of the river's slime, and of our stately steamer the mournful requiem be—

"Ed weeds is in her palace halls,
She rides the surge no more."

The twisted trunk of some old forest tree, rooted amid the shifting sands below, may suddenly pierce that slender plank, which is our sole division from Eternity. The channel lost in this impenetrable darkness, we may dash in pieces on the melancholy shore, or, fate still more terrible, go rapidly down, out in the midst of this broad Sea-River, in wild collision with a fellow pilgrim, on its deathful flood.

It was a source of thankfulness with the late lamented Henry Clay, that his Creator had given him a soul incapable of fear from the wrath of any being but Himself; and if the wrath of Deity be evinced in frowning skies, the voice of shouting winds, and the lashing together of angry waves, it seemed to me that, then and there, even that brave and lofty spirit might have stood mute and veiled, while "the Al-

mighty's form was glazing itself in tempests." As for myself, if not with fear, I was filled with a deep and solemn awe, and my mind almost unconsciously began revolving the chances of escape, in case of any emergency. I looked out; the clouds abated not in density, nor the wind in violence. It was bitterly cold. Alas! within that freezing flood the most expert swimmer could scarcely hope to gain the shore.

With a vivid presentiment of danger, amounting almost to a certainty, I sought my state-room, where I fervently commended myself to the protection of Him, who "rides upon the storm and rules the raging deep." I placed my preserver where it might be conveniently reached, and, with a mind somewhat tranquilized, returned to my solitary station.

I had been so busily engaged with my own thoughts, and the appearances without, that the gay company, laughing and chatting around, had made as little impression as so many moths circling in the light of a brilliant lamp, or I had experienced but a momentary astonishment at their total indifference to, or ignorance of, the outward gloom. Most of them, and, indeed, all of the lady passengers, I presume, were unconscious of its existence; for the day had, until the latter part of the evening, been a fair and cloudless lapse of sunshine; but on the countenances of two or three of the elderly gentlemen, I thought I could discern a slight shade of anxiety, which deepened as they returned from frequent observations upon the guards. Each indication was, however, unheeded, where the dreamy harp and the thrilling viol were steeping the soul into delicious forgetfulness of earth; and they, who bounded so gaily on the springing boards, could not know that they were quivering and straining, not beneath the tread of dancing feet, but under the redoubled pressure of steam, and before the buffeting pinions of the blast.

An old gentleman, for whom I had formed quite a friendship, entered the side door of the cabin, and, approaching, seated himself upon the divan at my side.

"You have been out," said I, "observing the unpropitious weather?"

"Exactly," was the reply. "I have been a constant passenger upon this river for the last twenty years, and I do not remember to have stemmed it upon a more wretched looking night than this."

"I am surprised at our captain," said I, "for running on such a night. It looks very much like rocklessness to imperil, unnecessarily, the lives of so many fellow beings. I wonder that some of the passengers do not request him to lay by till morning."

"They have—several have urged him to desist, but he persists in saying there is no danger in running. In truth, the river is high, and there is not very much fear of snags, at any rate; and he declares that his pilot is perfectly acquainted with the channel, and that we are as safe here as we would be, tied to the shore. But I suspect," said my companion, "the fact is the suddenness of the storm has taken the captain by surprise, and in this impenetrable darkness, it would now be impossible to make a landing. However, don't be alarmed," he added, "the moon rises about ten, and it is possible the clouds may break, and give us a clear night after all."

"Oh, no, I am not alarmed. I know it is best," I replied, "to preserve one's presence of mind when surrounded by danger, and then, you know, you may console yourself with the reflection that it is only the body which is in jeopardy."

"No," said he, "I don't know any such thing; I wish I did."

Such a remark surprised me exceedingly; I had often noticed him perusing the Scriptures, and I observed that I was under the impression that he was a very devout Christian.

"Oh, no! far from it. I read the Bible as a literary curiosity, and with the hope of discovering the truth if it is there; but I will leave you now, for I see you are as brave a soldier as I."

so gentle a spirit as his appeared to be, would at last be led into the paths of peace.

Inseparably, I began watching the gay surrounding groups of revelers, believing at least so far with my friend, as to conclude it useless to harrow my soul with images of what might not occur after all, as he had said.

There was, among our many fair passengers, one who had, from the first, interested me deeply. She was from Florida, that lovely land of flowers, and the warm tint of its glowing suns had been left upon her rosy cheek, and amid the rich masses of her waving hair. She had been at a boarding school in New York, to receive the "finish" of her education, and after visiting the Northern Lakes, was returning home under the protection of her brother. Our acquaintance had progressed quite rapidly, for my own sad spirit rejoiced to gather light from the constant joyousness reigning upon her broad, open brow, and swelling up forever from the depths of her bright blue eyes.

She was dancing, at the time, with a distinguished looking young man, whose becoming uniform, had I not previously known the fact, would have announced his destination to be the standard of his country, which was floating over the frontiers of Mexico, begirt by myriad foes.

The eye of the most superficial observer would have singled them out as the superlative pair among all the graceful votaries of Terpsichore, by whom they were surrounded; and I thought to myself that surely there had never existed a more complete yet harmonious contrast of physical perfection.

Milman was tall, shaft-like as an Indian chief, and almost as dark, with masses of midnight curls, clustering over his olive temples, and lending even a deeper hue of darkness to the large, shadowy eyes beneath; while the manly grace with which he moved through the measure had evidently been attuned to the martial roll of the "soul-stirring drum," and the shrill pippings of the "car-piercing fife." My little Alice was a very fair, light and airy as a sunbeam. Her height was very near five feet, three inches above mediocrity, but her proportions were so perfectly symmetric, that she seemed considerably lower. She appeared to have had the most accomplished instructors in dancing, but to have possessed a genius which scorned and rose above the rigid geometric rules of art—Nature, alone, breathed through every movement.

Like the waving of boughs stepped the graceful and free,
Like the bending of flowers above the blue sea.

She was dressed with extreme simplicity, yet in the perfection of taste. A close habit of dark gray cloth, fitted high in the neck, displayed to the best advantage her beautifully turned bust and falling shoulders. A tiny ruffle of fluted cambric rose around her delicate throat, bound by a band of black velvet, in which glittered a small but handsome diamond pin. Similar bands and ruffles confined her wrists and shaded her exquisitely shaped hands. It was her usual travelling costume, but I thought, as she moved these with her rich masses of chestnut hair, carelessly gathered back with a simple comb of twisted shell, a few rebellious ringlets floating down her temples here and there, as if to revel in the free sunshine of her spirit, that the most recherche costume de bal of rich brocades and gorgeous pearls could not have added a single ray of light to the lovely picture.

Occasionally, as she lifted her smiling features to those of her companion, I could discern rushing across her mirror-like brow, and veiling the stream of sunshine floating up from her lucid eyes, a fitting shadow which I had not before observed upon her countenance—a deep, dream-like infection of thought, soft and fleeting as the momentary gloom cast upon the white walls of a sun-lighted chamber by the pinions of a passing bird. It was not apprehension; she, like the rest who led the gay seductive dance, heard not the strife of elements without, but, quaffing in rich bursts of golden music, forgot that there was a world beyond our cabin halls.

Milman and herself, had, until within a few days past, been ignorant even of the

existence of the other; but there was something in the manner of Alice, a "je ne sais quoi," which, though perfectly feminine, would break through the little conventional knowledge she possessed, and betray that she had already suffered her heart to dwell with unusual pleasure upon the graces and assiduous of her fellow traveler. On the contrary, there was nothing in the deportment of Milman which could furnish a clue to the strictest scrutiny, by which to determine whether or not his attentions to Alice were more than a warm sentiment of friendship, or at most a passing fancy which began and would end with their traveling acquaintance.

He was evidently an accomplished man of the world, who at an age not very much under thirty, had thought, read and reflected much, and who had moreover enjoyed the fairest opportunities for studying that intricate volume, human nature. He had mingled in the best society in one of our large Northern cities, and was doubtless accustomed to breathe in the ear of beauty, complimentary phrases, and flowery nothing, or, as Erin's Bard more prettily expresses it,

"To sigh, yet feel no pain,
To weep, yet scarce know why,
To sport an hour with beauty's chain,
Then throw it idly by."

If his dark eye followed the fairy steps of his companion through the dance, nothing was involved thereby; so did mine, so in fact did every body's. If he lingered around her at the guitar, when she charmed the company to silence with the pure flute-like faultlessness of her voice, he would also rise and lead Miss Arabella Rose to the piano, or immediately become as deeply absorbed in a game of chess with Miss McFarland. He was a mystery! alas, for my poor little Alice! he did seem rather to prefer her society, but perhaps it was the interest with which the idle schoolboy regards the fragile butterfly ere the rude winds have despoiled it of its beautiful hues, and far too faintly evinced to have warranted her in bestowing upon him so valuable a gift as her fresh, unworldly heart. But my observations had come too late for warning, even had I been disposed to give it; he had already taken possession of her soul, as some gallant ship bursts into seas where bark has never sailed before.

The musicians called out a reel, a good old-fashioned Virginia reel; a dance new to Alice, and charming from its utter contrast to all she had been accustomed to see in the pinetting stiffness of graceless Mazourkas, the hobbling clumsiness of hop-sot Polkas, and the spinning volutions of that whirlingig which would call forth sucrors from a reckless Byron. Free and graceful as a disenfranchised bird, she glided in airy cyroids through its winding mazes, her cheeks flushed with the exercise, and smiles of almost infantile delight breaking over her bow-like lips, and dimpling the soft whiteness of her chin. Milman was still her partner, and I wondered if it were possible that those deep, unfathomable eyes were not drinking in the sunshine of that joyous face, and like shaded camera obscura, painting its lovely lineaments upon his soul in deep and imperishable lines of light and beauty.

I could not see his face, but in a sudden turn of the flying dance, I caught the expression of hers. He was retaining her hand for a moment, as he bent down to utter some remark, and that same ineffable look of angelic sorrow, which I had before observed—that shadow from the bright wings of the Bird of Paradise—hovered for an instant over her fair white brow, and threw a beautiful gleaming on what before had seemed almost too rapturous, and too intensely cloudless for contemplation.

I could not catch the slightest tone that was said, but I saw full well that love was breathing its various lay of mournful swells and joyous symphonies—"is constant chorus of continual change," across the unswept harp-strings of her being. What a look was that which she turned upon him! The native sunlight of her spirit seemed striving to gush up through its bright blue windows, and penetrate the impalpable cloud of sweet sadness floating over them—her lips, too, quivering with new and unusual emotion, seemed struggling to arch into their wonted smiles of merriment,

as if they pendulated between shadow and sunshine.

I question, however, if Milman took in the whole of this reply, for suddenly a wild terrific shock lifted our steamer out of the water, and dashed her backwards up the stream with fearful violence. Another and another shock, upturning tables and chairs, destroyed every thing like perpendicularity in our cabin; and at the same time a mighty boom, like the roar of ordnance, rose, clearing the darkness, and leaping in long and thundering reverberations out upon the sullen waves of the Mississippi. Then succeeded a slow careening from side to side, like the rocking motions of a settling ship, which produced the most sickening and deathlike sensations.

Instantly all was confusion and distress; wild shrieks broke from many a pallid lip. Some, who had been thrown prostrate, remained kneeling with clasped hands, in all the apathy of despair; others, frantic with alarm, flew in purposeless agony up and down the cabin, while a few found relief from fear in the embrace of insensibility.

It flashed upon me in a moment that no time was to be lost in reaching the guards. The only hope for safety was, that the cabin would part from the hull and float off, in which case our sole refuge was the deck above. Already it seemed to me that I could hear the gurgling of the waters rising beneath my feet; another moment would bear Eternity upon its wings. I could not have stood motionless for more than a second of time, but in that tiny atom of measurement, my whole past life, like a vast and many-colored panorama, flew in rapid review before my vision, which seemed suddenly endowed with fearful ubiquity, for its very minutest delineations; while I seemed spiritually to stand afar off upon some invisible eminence and behold my own destruction, as swift and wild as the melancholy absorption of some unrecorded meteor in the fathomless depths of midnight chaos.

I shuddered. Loudly exclaiming "The deck, the deck!" I rushed out upon the guards.

Milman pressed out behind me, leading, almost bearing, the lovely form of Alice. "Fear not," I heard him say, "trust to me; I will save you, or we perish together."

We stood, all three hesitating a moment. To our eyes, blinded by the glare we had just left, wave, sky and shore were alike undistinguishable. The keen, cold wind, blustering around us, dashed the mad spray in our faces, and pressed the wild thought upon our hearts, that their warm, ruddy currents would soon become as gelid as that fearful tide which flowed around and beneath us.

"The deck is our only hope," said I; "let us breathe one prayer, commending ourselves!"

"You are right," interrupted Milman; "let me lift you, Alice."

He raised her as easily as a feather's weight, and, springing upon the guards, was about to place her upon the deck above, when I caught his arm.

"Stop!" I exclaimed, "look, look!"

Just at that moment, balancing in unclouded brightness above the dark stretch of Mississippi forests, the moon rolled suddenly and serenely up the eastern skies. The dark clouds were seen flying like routed genii, before her victorious march; a broad sheet of refuge burst upon the waters, while out on the west, a sharp line of living light defined the white sand shore of Arkansas.

I had already taken in the surrounding objects, and never can I forget the features of that terrible scene. We were almost in the middle of the river, more than a half mile from either shore. Beneath us a score of white, upturned faces and dark forms were struggling for existence amid the battling waves, while despairing cries of "Save me, save me!" rose from the gurgling foam and pierced our listening hearts with anguish. Just below our prow the battered chimneys and half-submerged cabin of a gallant steamer were rocking on the waves a mournful wreck. Her gorgeous chandeliers were still swinging in melancholy mockery above the water's; her hull had gone swiftly down with many a perishing mortal.

We stood gazing in speechless horror on the fearful drama. Like the writhing anacanda, sinking into apathetic repose after the demolition of his prey, the glassy river rolled with sinister smiles above its victims and settled into calm tranquility beneath the cold rays of the pitiless moon. Those wild despairing cries were hushed forever.

With hearts awe-stricken and oppressed by all we had witnessed simultaneously, we turned to enter the cabin. But if all was now tranquil without, a wild admixture of pain and grief, of sorrow and suffering, which no pen could describe, awaited us within. More than thirty wretched objects were roaming restlessly up and down our cabin, wringing their hands, either in the anguish of mental woe or the agony of physical suffering. The helpless passengers of the ill-fated Swan, who had been rescued from a watery grave, shivering in dripping garments, they stood, bewailing a cherished wife or a cherub child sunk beneath the rushing wave; or with chilled and lacerated limbs, they mingled howls and curses with the most piteous and impatient implorations for relief.

Involuntarily, I drew my hands across my brow, to shut out the harrowing spectacle. How fervently did I there offer up my thanks to Him, who had mercifully preserved us from a similar fate!

But there was no time for inaction. Our own passengers were still paralyzed with fear. Every thing had transpired so rapidly that most were yet under the impression that we were sinking, nor knew that in collision with another boat our own had sustained but very little damage.

Prompt assistance was required for the unfortunate survivors, and few were in a condition to offer it. Alice was the only lady who seemed to have preserved any presence of mind. Milman was near her, agitated, and, for the first time that I had ever seen him so, deprived of self-control; yet it was evidently not the effect of fear.

Our captain and officers were, with generous humanity, making every effort to alleviate the sufferings of the unfortunate passengers.

There was a demand for scissors, to cut away the lacerated skin and flesh hanging in shreds from some unfortunate sufferer's arm. Alice sprang so seek the article required.

"You set me a good example," said Milman. "I have some little skill in surgery myself—and now is the time for its exertion."

It was well that he had, for the only medical character on board was confined to his state-room by illness, and unable to afford the least assistance. Milman, however, immediately assumed the command of affairs, and, like a ruling spirit, infused something like system into the wild disorder and confusion reigning around. With perfect self-reliance, he applied his own remedies, dressing their wounds with the most careful tenderness, and at length succeeded, to some extent, in mitigating the intense anguish of the sufferers.

Alice, too, stood near, pale, and with compressed lips, yet energetic and useful—truly "a ministering angel."

It is only such scenes of uncommon trial which shadow forth the real lineaments of character, "as darkness shows us worlds of light we never saw by day." I had supposed that Milman, from constant exposure to the garish light of fashionable society, had become merely a brilliant, but cold and unimpressible crystallization, whose indurated spirit could scarcely move out of its own sphere, to sympathize very deeply with the sorrows of humanity; nor had I dreamed of discovering such strength of will and powers of self-command in the character of my merry little Alice. But how mistaken! Of all our large complement of passengers, they, alone, seemed actuated by the tenderest spirit of compassion, and capable of rendering efficient and valuable aid.

Unfortunately, however, with many, assistance was of no avail. During the night, more than a dozen had found relief from suffering, in death. We made their graves that morning, but upon the solitary shore; no band of mourners was there, no prayers were said, no hymns were sung, but a train of melancholy winds swept howling by, the silvery cotton-weeds above

were whispering in sorrowful tones, and the great High Priest, among the rivers of earth, chanted a solemn requiem at their hasty burial.

On the same evening my own place of destination was reached. After the scenes I had witnessed, the prospect of "terra firma" was by no means disagreeable, yet it was a thought linked with the keenest regret that I was about to part with my fair sun-browned Floridian friend, in all probability for ever.

But the boat had loaded, and there was no space for extended adieus or parting scenes; one kiss upon her snowy brow, a whispered farewell, and we were sundered.

As the boat swung back into the river, she was out upon the guards. The same gray traveling habit displayed the exquisite contour of her figure. The rosy rays of the setting sun, fell, like impalpable worshippers, around her, tingling the waves of her shining hair, and blending with the kindred lucidity of her joyous countenance. "Upon the hill I turned to take one last fond look," Milman was standing near her; he raised his hat; her fairy-like fingers threw me a kiss across the waters, and as they floated away in the lengthening distance, the deepening twilight gathered around, and I saw them no more.

Several months afterwards, I was seated in my own little vine-clad portico, watching the gorgeous exit of the god of day, and listening to the thousand bird-tuned harps which thrilled the dark magnolia trees around me. Memory was busily engaged in linking her chain with the thoughts of my bright and beautiful fellow-traveler, and in retouching the lines she had left upon my soul, when I saw her last, transcendent in her own loveliness, and glittering in the gorgeous mantle of the departing day-god. I could see her out upon the guards again, bending to throw me a kiss, as the vessel, fair and graceful as a swan, glanced swiftly down the stream; her lover was standing at her side, and again I watched them melting in the clustering twilight, softly as the bright twin stars of heaven fade before the pinions of the purple rain-mist.

They were peeping my reveries, when, by a singular coincidence, my uncle handed me a delicately scented envelope, bearing the post mark, "Tallahassee, Florida."

"From Alice," I exclaimed; "coming events cast their shadows before; I was just thinking of her!"

I hastily tore open the envelope; it contained two wedding cards, one bearing a feminine inscription, "Miss Alice Jordan, at Home, Thursday evening, May 20;" the other, in bold and decided calligraphy, "Clarence Milman."

A White Slave.

The Toledo Blade furnishes the following item concerning the white slave who was chased into Canada a few days since:

"A day or two since, a woman, so white that the African blood in her veins was not perceptible on a casual observation, passed through on this famous route. She was from Kentucky. She soon found colored friends, and so close were her pursuers on her heels, that they were actually in this city while she was, and even saw them though they did not recognize her. Her friends dispatched her on the underground, late on Monday evening, and received telegraph news Tuesday noon, from Detroit, that she was safe. We are glad that a seizure was not attempted, because we are quite sure that it would not have been a 'Burns case,' though it might have been an 'Ellen Craft's affair,' and then the liberties of this great people would have gone down to oblivion in that dark abyss that has swallowed up all previous republics.

Since writing the above we have been shown a daguerreotype of the young woman by Mr. A. B. Weeks. It appears that while her pursuers were after her she quietly went to the daguerrean rooms alone, and had her likeness taken to leave to those who had befriended her. She ordered it kept safely until called for—Mr. Weeks had no suspicion that she was other than a white, well-bred lady. The closest scrutiny, aided by the knowledge that her blood had a tinge of the African, detects a lingering evidence of her blood origin about the lips, and the artist informs us that he thinks the waves of the brown hair were a little singular.